

# **Student and Teacher Beliefs about Language Learning: A Preliminary Study**

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## **Introduction**

The old adage that states that we are all "a product of our experience" goes a long way in explaining our attitudes and beliefs about how we should conduct ourselves in our daily lives and for the purpose of this study, our various beliefs about how languages should be learned. Each of us has been influenced in various ways by authority figures: teachers, parents, coaches; by our environment: home, educational, economic, social; and by the personal values we hold. Although not a complete list by any means, it does demonstrate the range of factors that influence our attitudes towards learning whether we prefer one methodology or strategy over another or our acceptance or rejection of new ideas of learning. It's quite possible that if teachers and students were taken as separate groups, the range of beliefs within each group may be wide. However, for our purposes of examining the classroom dynamic, we will concentrate on comparing how students and teachers feel about the usefulness of various classroom activities in second language learning.

## **Teacher and Learner Beliefs about Language Learning**

Student and teacher beliefs have been examined by a number of researchers. They have shown that students and teachers alike bring with them distinct and varying sets of ideas and preconceptions about how best to learn. Horwitz (1988) stated that investigating the beliefs learners have has "relevance to the understanding of their expectations of, commitment to, success in and satisfaction with language classes" (p. 283). Oxford (1990) found that there are a number of strategies available for students to use in language learning and therefore the use of one predominant style may inhibit learning to a great extent. Likewise, Richards and Lockhart (1994) found that the predominance of one teaching style may discourage learners from using strategies of their choice that could consequently inhibit learning. In a study comparing native and Japanese teachers of English, Chiba and Matsuura's study (1998) found some interesting differences. Namely, native English teachers felt more strongly that game-orientated activities and group work were effective for language learning, while discouraging the use of the students' native language in the classroom. Their

Japanese counterparts however, condoned the use of their students L1. Chiba and Matsuura also found that the Japanese teachers were stricter with student errors than native English teachers who showed more leniency toward errors in class.

In a large scale study of 517 learners done in Australia by Willing (1988), various classroom activities were examined. Students responded most positively to the following activities:

I like to practice sounds and pronunciation	62%
I like the teacher to tell me my mistakes	61%
In class I like to learn by conversations	55%
I like the teacher to explain everything to us	54%

However, the statements which elicited the lowest responses were

I like the teacher to let me find my mistakes	27%
In class, I like to learn by pictures, films and videos	19%
I like to learn English by talking in pairs	15%
In class I like to learn by games	10%
I like to study English by myself	3%

(Willing 1988: 117)

Nunan (1988a) followed up on Willings's study and mirroring the items, surveyed 60 teachers and asked them to rate the importance of the following activities in classroom teaching: pronunciation practice, explanations to class, conversation practice, error correction, vocabulary development, listening to/using cassettes, student self discovery of errors, using pictures, film and video, pair work, and language games. Interestingly, when comparing the results of the two studies, there is some disagreement with every activity but one, conversation practice, which both groups rated as "very high". As well, students and teachers gave language games an almost identical rating of "very low" and "low" respectively. In addition there is almost total disagreement with 3 activities: pair work, student self discovery of errors and listening to/using cassettes, where students "low" rating contradicted the teachers "high" and "very high" ratings. As well, the students' "very high" rating on error correction contradicted the teachers' "low" rating on that activity.

Clearly, a large gap exists in language learning beliefs in the classroom. If we as educators are to help students learn, it is worthwhile investigating these differences so that together we may decide how we can best achieve our common goal.

## Research Questions

The research questions for this project are

1. What classroom activities do students and teachers believe are helpful in language learning and teaching?

## 2. What differences exist between the two groups?

**Methods and Participants**

The present study uses a one-time questionnaire (see Table 1) to investigate the attitudes and beliefs of 134 students and 32 teachers about the usefulness of various classroom activities in language learning. The questionnaire is a combination of the one used by Willing (1988) and Nunan (1988a). The students were from two womens' universities in Nagoya and the teachers were teaching at various universities in Nagoya City and Aichi Prefecture. The questionnaire asked the participants the following question What degree of importance: would you rate the following classroom activities in language learning? The participants chose a reply from a 5-point scale that included very high, high, medium, low or very low.

**Results**

The results of the questionnaire given to both teachers and students can be found in Table 1 and 2 below. Table 1 illustrates the classroom activities, rated "very high" or "high" and thus were seen as being helpful starting from the most to least.

Table 1.

**Rank Order of Classroom Activities Seen as Most Helpful for Language Learning**

... by Students (N=134)		... by Teachers (N=32)	
1. conversation practice	85%	conversation practice	91%
2. pronunciation practice	80%	pair work	81%
3. working alone	78%	vocabulary development	78%
4. error correction by teacher	76%	student self discovery of errors	59%
5. explanations to the class	70%	pronunciation practice	53%
6. reading	68%	explanations to the class	51%
7. making speeches	67%	problem solving	50%
8. listening to/using tapes	64%	listening to/using tapes	38%
9. writing	59%	role playing	38%
10. student self discovery of errors	56%	language games	34%
11. problem solving	55%	using pictures, film and video	31%
12. language games	47%	writing	30%
13. vocabulary development	44%	making speeches	28%
14. pair work	44%	working alone	28%
15. role playing	42%	error correction by teacher	28%
16. using pictures, film and video	38%	reading	19%

(Adapted from Willing 1988: 116 and Nunan 1988a: 92)

Table 2 denotes, in rank order, those classroom activities that were given the "lowest scores", rated "low" or "very low" and thus were seen as the least helpful.

Table 2.

Rank Order of Classroom Activities Which Received the Lowest Scores

.... by students		... by Teachers	
role playing	30%	making speeches	53%
using pictures, film and video	18%	working alone	44%
pair work	17%	error correction by teacher	31%
language games	16%	listening to/using tapes	28%
vocabulary development	12%	using pictures, film and video	25%

## Discussion

It is clear by looking at the results that there are dramatic differences in the way teachers and students believe languages should be learned. As was found in the Willing and Nunan studies only one activity, conversation practice, was agreed upon as being the most helpful. This coincides closely with research done by Eltis and Low (1985), Alcoroso and Kalantzis (1985), Willing (1988) and Nunan (1988). In this study pronunciation practice was a close second just below conversation for the students, but well below for the teachers at fifth spot with a 30% fewer respondents ranking it as helpful. The students also felt that working alone and error corrections by the teacher were important at number three and four respectively. However, teachers ranked both of these toward the bottom. Since the communicative approach to language learning dominates instructional pedagogy, it is no surprise that pair work, conversation practice, and to a lesser degree role playing, have been seen as valuable activities for teachers. However, these same activities share a virtual opposite position with students.

Table 2 highlights those activities that received the highest number of low scores and thus reveal those activities as seen to be the least helpful. Here again there are few similarities with the exception of one, "using pictures, film and video", but with students viewing it as even less helpful than teachers. Surprisingly, some of the most favored activities for language teachers, role playing and pair work are seen as being the least helpful by students. As well, games which are seen to be by many educators as a way to make language learning "fun" appear to be thought of as less useful by those whom it is supposed to aiding. Teachers, on the other hand, felt that making speeches and working alone were the least helpful classroom activities. Students, however, clearly feel differently by putting "working alone" as the third most important and "making speeches" half way down the list at number 7.

## Discussion

The mismatches evident in this project mirror those found in other studies comparing learner with teacher beliefs. As was found teachers rated pair and group work, role plays, conversation practice and vocabulary development as being important while students rated more traditional activities such as error correction, pronunciation and explanations to the class as more useful Nunan (1988a), Willing (1988), Elis and Low (1985). The only activity found to be common and of most importance was conversation practice. Even here, there are misconceptions to what conversation practice means.

In follow up interviews with the students for whom I was teaching (67 of 134), three points stood out which offer some valuable insights. At first glance it might seem odd that students rated conversation practice so highly, yet illustrated such a low preference for pair work and role playing, two activities which provide students optimal opportunity for conversation practice. What the interviews revealed was that conversation practice in the students minds meant talking with the teacher, not another student. Despite the fact that they enjoyed talking with other students in the class, they did not think that they could learn anything of significance by talking with another student. This went even to the point of preferring lecture style classes to pair work because they felt that they may be able to learn more words or ideas from the teacher and get a chance to ask questions. It also may explain why "working alone" is rated so highly by students. This clearly demonstrates traditional learning strategies whereby the teacher is the dispenser of knowledge and thus questions the value of using the communicative approach as the sole pedagogical tool many teachers employ in the classroom (Elis and Low, 1985). Secondly, the students felt that some activities such as "using pictures, film and video" could be done by themselves either at school, in the library or at home and thus were a waste of classroom time. Lastly, although the students for the most part enjoyed language games, they could not see the learning value of the activity and therefore, thought them as a wasteful classroom activity.

## Conclusion

Knowing that students and teachers each have their own differing ideas about how best to learn languages, educators are presented with a dilemma about how to adequately approach methodology and activities in the classroom. Research has shown that it is difficult for both teachers and students to change how they teach and learn (Oxford, 1990). Since there is no conclusive evidence one way or another of a "correct" pedagogical method as both traditional and communicative approaches have resulted in successful learners, one possible way may be for each to meet in the middle; that is, to direct activities which would satisfy the traditional tendencies that the students want while using communicative approaches in conversation practice that teachers clearly seem to hold dear.

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